



United States
Department of
Agriculture

AUG 29 2011

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Farm and Foreign
Agricultural
Service

Farm Service
Agency

1400 Independence
Ave, SW
Stop 0539
Washington, DC
20250-0539

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
United States Senate
135 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-1501

Dear Senator Grassley:

Thank you for your letter of August 4, 2011, informing us of the concerns of multiple constituents over the Farm Service Agency (FSA) Notice AO-1504.

Our county committees (COC) have been an integral part of FSA for over 70 years, and FSA gave serious thought before issuing this notice. COC members are very much needed as we face budgetary constraints and experienced COC members will ensure that FSA is able to continue its service to rural America while dealing with reduced funding. The AO notice was not an attempt to prevent committees from conducting meetings when they are needed, but was a request that COC members meet only when necessary to carry out their responsibilities. Local offices were also asked to look at alternative methods for meetings such as teleconferences, when feasible, to carry out those important duties.

The national office is not mandating specific parameters for COC members to conduct meetings. Those decisions are best determined locally. We are asking COC members and field managers to exercise prudence and due diligence in making those decisions to assist with holding the line on spending and to only schedule meetings when it is absolutely necessary to do so. One of our key goals is to maintain funding for our permanent employees.

Obviously there are local situations that will affect those decisions as in your example that a COC member may have only a cell phone, and conference calls could result in additional charges to the member. Similar issues are being taken into consideration. Program concerns also have to be considered. Some committees will need to meet more frequently than others depending on the level of program activities in those counties.

We agree that we need to continue our policies of openness and transparency. Minutes of meetings will continue to be available to the public, and State offices already are working on guidance to the counties that would allow members of the public to notify the county office if they wish to attend a meeting being scheduled as a teleconference.



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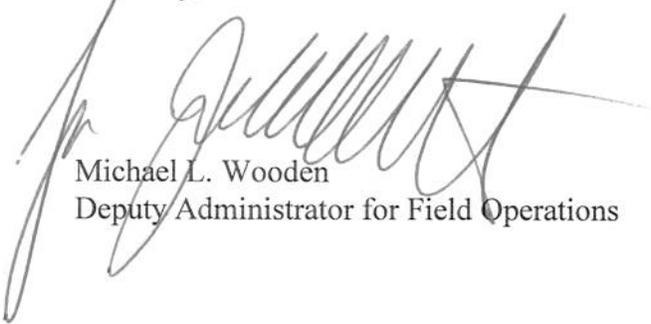
The Honorable Charles E. Grassley

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The COC members and field managers must be aware that we are in a very serious budgetary situation, and all agencies of USDA, not just FSA, have to examine every possible area to save money. FSA is faced with large reductions in administrative funding from FY10, and our administrative funding levels were already at minimal levels to cover existing expenses. Reducing the number of COC meetings to only those needed to conduct essential business is just one area in which FSA is seeking to conserve funds. Employees have also been asked to be very prudent in their activities and additional costs saving ideas have been provided in Notice AO-1506.

I believe we all want the same thing. We must provide the service to producers while at the same time ensuring that we have the funding to pay existing employees for the remainder of the FY and beyond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael L. Wooden", is written over the typed name and title.

Michael L. Wooden
Deputy Administrator for Field Operations